The Lasting Impact of Nazi Germany's antisemitic propaganda in the Middle East 1945-1948

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Is there a connection between the Nazi war of extermination against the Jews, which ended in May 1945, and the war of the Arab armies against Israel, which started in May 1948? This question is obvious. But it is rarely asked.

At the end of World War II the Nazis took some measures to prepare for the forseeable war against a Jewish state. With their own defeat looming, they wished to preserve their antisemitic legacy by taking steps to prevent at least the future establishment of a Jewish state.

Amin el-Husseini, the former Mufti of Jerusalem, for example, mentions in his memoirs that in October 1944 the Wehrmacht provided aircraft to store ammunition and weapons in Palestine - as "preparations for the days after the end of World War II" and "for their preparation for the battles to follow," as the Mufti memoirs put it. The Nazi Foreign Office too had invested in the post-1945 period. The huge sums of money that it gave the Mufti in April 1945 were intended for preparation for these "battles to follow" in Palestine.

Far more important than ammunition boxes and Mufti money, however, was the constant dissemination of anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda in Arabic that began in 1937 and ended only in April 1945. This propaganda and its impact is the topic on which my presentation today focuses, building on the pioneering work of Jeffrey Herf in 2009 and David Motadel in 2014.

My first part will outline the methods by which the Nazis sought to disseminate their anti-Semitism in the Middle East. In the second part, I will present some examples that show how the antisemitic seeds sown by the Nazis took root after 1945.

Nazi antisemitism for the Arab world

In 1937, the Peel Commission's first partition plan for Palestine suggested the creation of a small Jewish sub-state in Palestine. This alerted Nazi Germany which now started to incite Arab antisemitism in a systematic and massive way. However, and this is of importance,

Berlin discovered that its concept of racial antisemitism did not find fertile ground in Muslim communities.

"The level of education of the broad masses is not advanced enough for the understanding of the race theory", wrote a leading Nazi in Egypt.

"The broad masses lack a feeling for the race idea" explained also the instructor for propaganda at the German embassy in Tehran in a letter to the Foreign Office in Berlin, and therefore recommended "to lay all the emphasis on the religious motif in our propaganda in the Islamic world. This is the only way to win over the Orientals".

Therefore, in order "to win over" the Arabs, the Nazis, of all people, began to dress up as Muslims. They started to use and misuse Islamic scripture so as to lend credibility to their murderous hate of Jews. Let me quote David Motadel:

„German propaganda combined Islam with anti-Jewish agitation to an extent that had not hitherto been known in the modern Muslim world. … Sacred texts such as the Qur'an … were politicized to incite religious violence".

I would like to give two examples of the Nazis' actions in this regard.
The first deals with the brochure "Islam and Jewry", written in 1937, the other with the Nazi's Arabic radio propaganda.

"Islam and Jewry" is, as far as we know, the very first document that systematically combined anti-Jewish tropes from the time of Mohammad in Medina with elements of Europe's conspiracy theory. It is thus the first written evidence of what I call Islamic antisemitism and the forerunner of Sayyid Qutb's "Our struggle with the Jews". "Islam and Jewry" concludes with the following words:

"[T]he verses from the Qur'an and hadith prove to you that the Jews have been the bitterest enemies of Islam and continue to try to destroy it. Do not believe them, they only know hypocrisy and cunning. Hold together, fight for the Islamic thought, fight for your religion and your existence! Do not rest until your land is free of the Jews." "Judenfrei" – is a typical Nazi expression which we do not find in early Islamic writing.

The first Arabic version of "Islam and Jewry" was published in August 1937 in Cairo by Mohammed Ali Al-Taher, the Director of the Palestinian-Arab Bureau of Information in Egypt, who is said to have had many contacts with Nazi agents in Egypt.

One month later, in September 1937, this 30 pages brochure was distributed to the 400 participants of the first Pan-Arab Congress in Bludan, a location in Syria. This congress was organized by Amin el-Husseini, the Mufti of Jerusalem in order to fight the two-state-solution according to the Peel plan.

In 1938 a German version of „Islam and Jewry“ was published in Berlin under the title: „Islam – Judentum. Aufruf des Großmufti an die islamische Welt im Jahre 1937“ (Islam – Judaism. Call of the Grand Mufti to the Islamic world in 1937). This was the first time that an author of this text – Amin el-Husseini – was mentioned.

Finally, during the Second World war, the Arabic version of this brochure was printed and distributed in large numbers by German forces and translated into several languages . There is no doubt that the Nazis used this pamphlet for their propaganda purposes. To what extent they were also involved in its creation is, however, still unknown.

The very date of its publication and dissemination – 11 years before the foundation of Israel and 30 years before Israel’s assumption of control in Gaza and the West Bank – is revealing, since it contradicts the widespread assumption that Islamic antisemitism developed as a response to alleged Israeli misdeeds. It was not the behavior of the Zionists that prompted the publication of this hostile text but rather the very first attempt to agree on a two-state plan. This fact suggests that genocidal Jew-hatred was rather a cause, not a consequence of the crises in the Middle East conflict.

My second example concerns the Nazi’s most important instrument for the propagation of Islamic antisemitsm: Broadcasts in Arabic language. They were broadcast from a shortwave transmitter from Zeesen, a small town south of Berlin. Every night for six years – from April 1939 until April 1945 – that station spread hatred of Jews in Arabic across the Arab world. Back then, listening to the radio was not a private but a public affair.

The men listened to the radio at the bazaar, at marketplaces and in coffee houses. The content of the programs became the dominant topic of conversation, which multiplied their impact.

American historian Jeffrey Herf discovered the transcribed manuscripts of these broadcasts and and made them known in his outstanding study "Nazi Propaganda for the Arab world".

Radio Zeesen addressed the audience as Muslims, not as Arabs and combined the recitation of Qur’anic verses with with a crude, popular anti-Semitism. This is what the British secret service reported on the effect of this propaganda:

„In general it may be said that the middle, lower middle and lower classes listen to the Arabic broadcasts from Berlin with a good deal of enjoyment. They like the racy, ‚juicy‘ stuff which is put over. …

What the average Palestine Arab does imbibe, however, is the anti-Jew material. This he wants to hear and to believe; and he does both. To that extent German propaganda is definitely effective.“

Berlin’s broadcasts in Arabic were well-done, indeed. There were excellent speakers, carefully selected Arabic music and a very good sound quality. At times, the BBC people and

others were downright desperate since the German broadcasts were agitating, mocking and inciting, while the BBC's broadcasts dull, unbiased, objective.

There are reports which show that the antisemitic message of Radio Zeesen was popular also among Arabs who otherwise disliked Nazi Germany. That's not particularly surprising. Because when it came to hating Jews, the Nazis could build on the patterns of early Islamic anti-Judaism and they could instrumentalize the local conflict with the Zionists.

In retrospect, those six years of permanent radio propaganda turned out to be a turning point that divided Middle Eastern history into a before and an after. These years worsened the image of the Jews in the Arab world. They fostered an exclusively anti-Jewish reading of the Qur'an. They popularized the European world-conspiracy myths. And they shaped a genocidal rhetoric towards Zionism and Israel and thus prepared the Muslims of the Middle East for the "battles to follow".

This demonization of Zionism and the Jews took firm root in the minds of many Arab leaders and is certainly one of the reasons why they reacted so horrified to the United Nations partition plan of November 1947 which envisaged a Jewish and an Arab state for Palestine. Ali Mahir, the former prime minister of Egypt, confirmed that „Arab opposition to Zionismus was [also] the product of Nazi propaganda in the Arab East." This brings me to my second part.

Antisemitic sentiment and the 1948 war

Radio Zeesen ceased operation in April 1945 but its frequencies of hatred remained virulent. Thus, the idea of thwarting a Jewish state at any cost lived on and found a new home in Egypt, where, after 1945, the Muslim Brotherhood built the world's largest antisemitic movement. This organization, founded in 1928 by Hasan al-Banna, had received funding from Nazi Germany in the 1930s and had also been ideologically trained by Nazi agents in Egypt. By 1948, its membership has risen to over a million.

In November 1945 – six months after the Holocaust – the Muslim Brotherhood led a 100,000-strong demonstration in Cairo which ended in the first pogrom of Egypt's modern history. A mob broke into Cairo's Jewish quarter, attacked Jewish shops and desecrated synagogues.

In 1946, the Brotherhood not only defended the close alliance between Amin el-Husseini and Adolf Hitler but also hailed the Mufti as the man who would realize Hitler's dream. "This hero," they rejoiced after his return from Paris in 1946, "fought Zionism with the help of Hitler and Germany. Germany and Hitler are gone, but Amin el-Husseini will continue the struggle."

The Mufti did continue this Nazi struggle indeed. He embodies – more than anyone else – the link between the Nazis' big war against the Jews and the subsequent smaller war of the Arabs against Israel. According to Israeli Arabist Hillel Cohen, "there can be little doubt that

the Mufti's inflexible position and refusal to accept any partition proposal were the major reasons for the outbreak of war in 1948."

During the first months of 1948, the Arab League shrank back from deploying regular troops in the conflict against the Jewish state. The decision to invade Israel was taken only at the last minute.

My most recent book shows the extent to which the Mufti's and the Brotherhood's activism and the aftermath of Nazi propaganda contributed to the Arab decision to nevertheless attack the just founded Israel in May 1948.

It was the Muslim Brotherhood that created an atmosphere in which war seemed to be the only logical and natural course of action. They formed a nationalist mass movement that longed for the catharsis of a military confrontation and whipped up a tidal wave of public anger that no one could withstand.

The Egyptian Prime Minister Mahmoud al-Nuqrashi was among those who had initially opposed a military intervention. Then however, as he admitted, he had been swayed by a public opinion that "was all in favor of the war, and considered anyone who refused to fight as a traitor." No Arab leader, asserted also Abd al-Rahman Azzam, the head of the Arab League, could make a compromise with the Zionists and hope to stay alive, let along in power.

It finally happened on the night of May 15, 1948: Syrian, Lebanese, and Iraki troops advanced from the north, Jordanian forces from the east and Egyptian units from the south into the territory of the State of Israel, which had been founded hours earlier. This fateful war triggered the refugee catastrophe that has marked the Middle East conflict ever since.

It goes without saying that there were also other motives for the attack on the newly founded Israel than antisemitism. British policies for example or the intra-Arab power struggles between Egypt and Jordan. For the „Arab Street", however, these topics were irrelevant.

Preventing the emergence of a Jewish state and wiping out the Jews living in Palestine had been constant themes of the Nazis' radio propaganda between April 1939 and April 1945. It relentlessly assailed its listeners with horror stories according to which the Jews were planning not only to destroy the Al Aqsa Mosque, but also, starting from their base in Palestine, to embark on the total destruction of Islam and the Arabs. In 1946, a British Foreign Office cable "spoke of Arab hatred of the Jews as being greater than that of the Nazis". This was certainly exaggerated but it nonetheless contained a kernel of truth.

Between 1945 and 1948, the antisemitic current in the Arab world was thus able to seize the initiative and set the agenda. The anti-Jewish echoes of National Socialism had been allowed to resonate unhindered.

Back to my question: Is there a connection between the Nazi war of extermination against the Jews and the war of the Arab armies against Israel in May 1948?

Yes, there is. In my most recent book, I substantiate in detail my assumption that the Nazis' antisemitic propaganda was one of the decisive factors that led the Arab states going to war against Israel in May 1948. I show that there is an ideological link between the Nazi war against the Jews and the Arab war against Israel three years later, so that the latter can be interpreted as a kind of aftershock of the great catastrophe of 1939-45.

The "Lessons and Legacies" conference was hosted by the "Holocaust Educational Foundation of Northwestern University". I gave my presentation as part of Panel Three *"Aspects of the Aftermath of the Holocaust outside Germany"*. Other speakers on this panel were Norman J.W. Goda, University of Florida and Jeffrey Herf from the University of Maryland. Goda talked about *"Jacques Vergès and ‚the Zionists' – Postcolonialism, Israel, and Holocaust Distortion in 1980s France"* and Herf about *"Israel's Moment: International Support and Opposition to Establishing the Jewish State, 1945-1949"*.

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